

## Realizing Your Talents

By Douglas Eby

What does it mean to realize your talents, and how do you do it?

What are some of the psychological issues that can get in the way?

What are some of the personal characteristics that self-actualizing people share?

This article will be at least a start toward looking at those big questions.

A definition of the word "realize" includes "to grasp or understand clearly; to make real; give reality to."

Realizing our talents is an active, continuing process of knowing not only what we can do, but who we are.



"Each of us has a tendency to underestimate his or her own abilities.

"We should realize that we have deep within ourselves deep reservoirs of great ability, even genius that can be tapped if we'll just dig deep enough."

Earl Nightingale - from his article [The Great Problem-Solving Tool](#)

> Image from book: [Maps of the Imagination](#)

> Related pages: [Awareness / thinking](#) [The shadow self](#)



**"Women, as well as men, were given minds to use and the ability to develop skills in various ways. I believe this is so primarily because, in the scheme of the universe, for real satisfaction every human being must earn his living.**

**"If you have gifts, natural gifts, and you never develop them, you are as guilty as the man in the Bible who wrapped his talent in a napkin and buried it so he could return to his Master what his Master had given him."**

**Eleanor Roosevelt [1884-1962]**

*"Self actualization is not only an end state but also the process of actualizing one's potentialities at any time, in any amount..."*

*"Self-actualization means using one's intelligence. It does not mean doing some far-out thing necessarily, but it may mean going through an arduous and demanding period of preparation in order to realize one's possibilities..."*

*"Self actualization means working to do well the thing that one wants to do."*

One of the influential psychologists who defined the human potential movement was Abraham Maslow (1908–1970). That quote is from his article [Self-Actualizing and Beyond](#).

For more than twenty years, Maslow made intensive biographical and psychological studies of notable people who had developed full lives and expressed multiple talents.

Among those were Albert Einstein, William James, Spinoza, Goethe, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Aldous Huxley, Jane Adams, Joseph Haydn, Robert Browning, Walt Whitman, Henry Longfellow, Eleanor Roosevelt, Albert Schweitzer, Ralph Waldo Emerson and many others.



This report on Realizing Your Talents (and the main Talent Development Resources site) is not about becoming "notable" - the idea is to present ideas that may help you to more fully understand and make use of your creative abilities, to explore some of the psychological and social issues that interfere with - or encourage - living fully and actualizing talents.

In multiple books such as [The Farther Reaches of Human Nature](#), Maslow listed characteristics of self-actualizers - people who are able to really participate in the "ongoing process in which one's capacities are fully, creatively, and joyfully utilized."

What follows is an expansion of some key characteristics he listed, with my comments, some quotes, plus links to related material.

### **More efficient perception of reality and more comfortable relations with it.**

Maslow wrote that healthy people are more able to see and accept the world as it is, rather than as distorted by their needs, values, fears and beliefs.

Of course, that is an ideal, and we can have different degrees of perception, and comfort with reality. Like other items Maslow described, things like "perception of reality" is subjective, open to different interpretations, and exists on a spectrum or continuum.

Emotional intelligence, mental health challenges and other aspects of being human can impact how we relate to the world and other people, and express our talents.

*"Seventy percent of success in life is showing up."*

Woody Allen

Many of us have used alcohol or other drugs to explore inner realities, try to enhance creativity, deal with pain or self-medicate. Many years ago, for example, I used drugs for a while to "energize" myself for extremely long working hours, and to manage depression. Ultimately, I got treatment, and regained better health.

Not to get all preachy about it, but drug misuse is a dangerous choice, and does not really enhance mental clarity, self awareness or good social relations. It is a way to not "show up" as completely as we can.

[Also see my article [Gifted, Talented, Addicted](#), and the pages on [Addiction / dependency](#) and [Addiction resources](#).]

Strong emotions such as [anger](#) and [anxiety](#) including stage fright, social phobia and fear of public speaking, are also issues that can get in our way of being fully engaged with living.

There's an old saying to the effect, "Anxiety makes us stupid" -- I've certainly experienced that more than a few times.

[Also see [anxiety articles](#) and [Anxiety relief products / programs](#).]

Depression and other mood disorders like bipolar affect many creative people. If you think you might be depressed, take an honest look at it. It may be a normal part of existence to be mildly depressed at some times, in some circumstances, but if it is interfering with your life, do something.

There are many articles, books and products on the site that can help. For example, many people (including myself) get benefit from using St. John's Wort and making some dietary changes.

Creativity coach and therapist Eric Maisel writes in his book [The Van Gogh Blues](#) and his [articles](#) about the need for creative people to maintain meaning in their lives to avoid depression.

[Also see the [Depression and Creativity](#) section.]

There are strategies we can use to improve our resilience and learn to be more in charge of our emotions and thinking. Sports psychology, cognitive therapy and mindfulness are some of these approaches.

[Also see [Awareness / thinking articles](#), [Meditation and mindfulness articles](#) and [Mental fitness](#).]

### **Acceptance - of self, others, nature**

This word 'acceptance' has different shadings of meaning. I think what Maslow probably had in mind was "the mental attitude that something is believable and should be accepted as true."

There is also a kind of acceptance that involves approval, even unconditional approval. But to me, and many others of course, there are things (like disrupting pain, or hurtful behavior) that are not acceptable in that sense.

Personal growth is partly a matter of deciding what is not working or insufficient about our lives, and changing what we can.

But what counts is seeing reality for whatever it is, regardless of what your moral or other judgment is about it.

In a section of his new book [Personal Development for Smart People](#), Steve Pavlina writes about the need to be brutally honest and face the truth of our lives.

He says "Truth is the first principle of personal development. We primarily grow as human beings by discovering new truths about ourselves and our reality.

"You can accelerate your growth tremendously by consciously seeking truth and deliberately turning away from falsehood and denial."

And Eckhart Tolle, author of [A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose](#), talks about the power of acceptance as "At this moment, this is what I feel, and this is what the external situation is."



Oprah says she agrees that "nonresistance to the moment is one of the most important things we can learn."

[From article [Eckhart Tolle On Sensitivity.](#)]

Tolle writes in the article about the experience of feeling very sensitive to loud noises and other stimulation, such as city traffic, and how this may involve reactions, even body sensations, but also "certain thoughts in your head about the situation that says, I can't stand being here any longer, it's dreadful, dreadful."

He says that gaining awareness of the different levels of reaction can help shift the way you react.

High sensitivity is an area that was difficult for me to accept earlier in life, especially high school, when being a sensitive introvert was not a way to gain many friends - or dates. But lately I appreciate knowing that many accomplished people in the arts are highly sensitive, and have learned how work with it, or even be "happy introverts."

Accepting, then, may involve how you respond to qualities in yourself and others, and how you react to the environment.

### **Spontaneity; simplicity; naturalness**

*"Pure spontaneity consists of free, uninhibited, uncontrolled, trusting, unpremeditated expression of the self.. with minimal interference by consciousness.*

*"Control, will, caution, self-criticism, measure, deliberateness are the brakes upon this expression.."*

Abraham Maslow

Barbra Streisand, for example, has commented about the need to temper the drive that many people have toward perfectionism, which is one of those "brakes": "We have to accept imperfections in ourselves, in others, in life. And it's part of the beauty of the experience in life.

"Nothing can be perfect. Also, perfection is cold. Imperfection has humanity in it. Why I love making movies is I'm thrown into nature, into life, into the spontaneity of the moment."

[From my article [Perfectionism.](#)]

Spontaneity may not be a "natural" quality for many people - likewise simplicity. Especially with complex, demanding careers and lives, it may take a conscious effort to live more simply, but many people report it has deep benefits.

Brad Swift, Founder and Director of the [Life On Purpose Institute](#), writes in an article that Mark Burch says in his book, *Simplicity: Notes, Stories and Exercises for Developing Unimaginable Wealth*, that "simplicity starts with a fundamental shift in consciousness,

otherwise you will continue to be uptight, worried and stressed, whether you have a lot of possessions or you have none at all."

Burch says simple living "does not begin with discarding personal possessions and then searching for alternative, simpler ways of meeting the same needs. Rather, the technology begins with the cultivation of mindfulness.

"As we grow in our capacity for and enjoyment of mindfulness, then the outer aspects of our lives eventually and progressively come into alignment with this changed consciousness."

Swift adds, "As Ann and I continued along our path of simple living, we found this process occurring naturally and with little effort."

Simplifying your life allows you to better focus your attention and energies on what you really want to develop in yourself, and what you want to accomplish.

### **Fully, vividly, selflessly**

*"First, self-actualization means experiencing fully, vividly, selflessly, with full concentration and total absorption. It means experiencing without the self-consciousness of the adolescent." Abraham Maslow*

Of course, just because we are no longer adolescents doesn't mean we are immune from feeling self-conscious. And many adolescents have leadership qualities, including being confident and self-assured.

One way that self-consciousness can impact us is feelings that we aren't "enough" in some way to pursue a dream or goal. Or that we're a "fraud" and don't have the talent.

This is not to say it makes sense to accept the slogan "You can do anything you set your mind to." Being honest with and about yourself means accepting what physical, emotional and intellectual qualities you have.

Of course, those qualities can often be developed; we can educate and train ourselves to do more - that's partly what personal growth and the whole self-improvement area is about. But we need to work with what we really are, not a movie fantasy.

[Also see my article [Being brutally honest with ourselves.](#)]

But being too self-critical can lead to feeling like a fraud, also called the impostor syndrome, and is a way to deny the real abilities we have, and thus stop ourselves from even trying to develop further.

In her article [The Impostor Syndrome - Finding a Name for the Feelings](#), Dr. Valerie Young explains that the concept was developed by psychologists who "found that many of their female clients seemed unable to internalize their accomplishments.



"External proof of intelligence and ability in the form of academic excellence, degrees, recognition, promotions and the like was routinely dismissed.

"Instead, success was attributed to contacts, luck, timing, perseverance, personality or otherwise having 'fooled' others into thinking they were smarter and more capable than these women 'knew' themselves to be."

Of course being male does not prevent us from experiencing those feelings.

What about the "fully, vividly" part that Maslow listed?

Another leading teacher and writer in the area of personal development, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, PhD (pronounced me-high chick-sent-me-high), talks about working and living passionately and in a state of "flow":

"Of all human activities, creativity comes closest to providing the fulfillment we all hope to get in our lives. Call it full-blast living.

"Deep interest and involvement in obscure subjects often goes unrewarded, or even brings on ridicule... Yet when a person is working in the area of his or her expertise, worries and cares fall away, replaced by a sense of bliss."

[From his article [The Creative Personality](#).]

Living in a state of frantic doing all the time, multitasking and pumping your adrenaline with drugs, including caffeine, may feel 'vivid' - but that is not really what Maslow and others mean by authentic intensity and passion.

Steve Pavlina notes, "I used to drink several cups of coffee a day, but I kicked the habit a long time ago because I found that caffeine made me too jittery and unfocused."

[From my post "[Caffeine, anxiety, productivity](#)."]

### **Selfless, or ego-driven?**

It isn't an either-or choice, of course. It's a matter of balance.

Contributing your time and energy to a social cause or another individual person, is a way that many people have learned more about their talents, as well as helping others in the process. There are a number of quotes about celebrities and others on the [Social activism](#)

page.

But being selfless in this way is not to say you should value your needs less or deplete your energies and resources by always making others a higher priority than yourself.

But being too ego-centered or narcissistic is also limiting.

Maslow writes about actualization as "Lessening of defenses and inhibitions... our guardedness." He said self-actualizing persons are not ego-centered but focus on problems outside themselves.

*"When the supremacy of ego is weakened in your life,  
you can then seek the power of intention and maximize your potential."*

Wayne Dyer - author of [The Power of Intention](#)

One sense of this word "ego" is a distorted self-regard, what psychologist Carl Jung referred to as "inflated consciousness... hypnotized by itself."

Many people recognize the need to modulate this kind of ego in order to facilitate the creative process. [More in my article [Ego and Creativity](#).]

Eckhart Tolle in his article [On Guilt and Ego](#) explains some of the ways our ego mind can interfere with clarity and growth. He says "one of the jobs of the ego is to blame others.. Another job of the ego is to make yourself feel guilty... the ego loves to have a strong sense of identity and no sense of identity is stronger than the negative one, where you condemn yourself for something."

*"Each of us has a tendency to underestimate his or her own abilities.  
We should realize that we have deep within ourselves deep reservoirs of great ability,  
even genius that can be tapped if we'll just dig deep enough."* Earl Nightingale

That is a great reminder from the personal development leader, from his article [The Great Problem-Solving Tool](#).

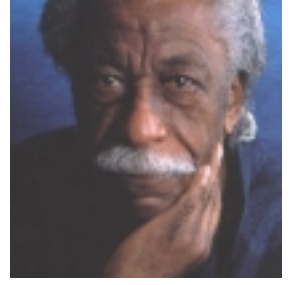
And here is a reminder of why that personal development effort is worthwhile:

*What inevitably exists beyond the next level is the possibility that matters: to come home to who you truly are. Whatever your level now, as you raise your game, you increase possibilities for new and deeper expressions of your humanity. This is achievement. This is truly maximizing your potential."*

Kenneth W. Christian, PhD, author of the book  
[Your Own Worst Enemy: Breaking the Habit of Adult Underachievement](#)

Personal growth is not another item on our 'to do' list; it is a life-long adventure.

Gordon Parks (1912 – 2006) was a groundbreaking American photographer, musician, poet, novelist, journalist, activist and film director.



He commented at age 85, "I really feel that I'm just ready to start."

So whatever age you are, keep exploring ways to realize your talents.

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